

## POSTER

### Investigating the Latent Structure of Sexual Sadism: A Taxometric Analysis

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Sexual sadism can be described as the experience of sexual pleasure produced by acts of cruelty and bodily punishment (Krafft-Ebing, 1886). Sadists are usually described as a discrete class of people, committing serious crimes and presenting a high risk of recidivism. Perceived as a disease which one can or cannot have, sadism was conceptualized and studied as if sadists were fundamentally different from non-sadists. However, recent studies concerned with dimensional measures suggest that sexual sadism, as assessed dimensional scale, present a dimensional structure rather than a categorical structure (Mokros *et al.*, 2011; Nitschke *et al.*, 2009b).

The goal of the present study was to investigate the latent structure of sexual sadism by examining whether its underlying structure is best conceptualized as dimensional (a difference in degree) or categorical (a difference in kind). Taxometric procedures provide an empirical means of determining whether a latent construct, in this case sadism, is typologically distinct from normal behavioral functioning (Ruscio *et al.*, 2006; Waller & Meehl, 1998). MAMBAC, MAXCOV and L-mode analyses were conducted on data from a sample of 474 sexual offenders assessed at the Massachusetts Treatment Center between 1959 and 1991.

In summary, results indicate that sexual sadism is better conceptualized as dimensional ranging from low to high levels of sexual sadism. This view is in accordance with the literature and will emphasize the movement toward a dimensional interpretation. Given that a diagnosis of this magnitude results in meaningful consequences, it is important to ascertain that it meets rigorous empirical standards and is the best possible reflection of its latent structure. Implications both for clinical assessment and for research on etiology and development of sexual sadism are discussed.